

Diasporic Hereafters in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Once in a Lifetime"

Munos Delphine, University of Liège

In the recent literature of the Indian-American diaspora, the accelerated time/space of late capitalism, the far-reaching influence of an electronic media culture and the paradoxes of a new global interaction are generally associated with a transnational turn in the diasporic subjectivity which, as Vijay Mishra remarks in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, distinguishes "new" diasporas from "old" ones and calls for more flexible notions of "homeland" and "arrival" (3). This "transnational turn" indeed complicates the space of migrant identity construction and makes it inadequate to now represent immigrant self-fashioning in terms of a prefabricated opposition between "India" and "America" or in terms of a one-directional movement from the homeland to the New World.

Perhaps because it is coupled with zigzagging paths to new states of belonging, the contemporary diasporic subjectivity is frequently perceived as emblematic of concepts such as "fluidity," "multiple affiliations" and "national non-attachment." Hybridity theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and James Clifford, to name but the most influential ones, tend to celebrate today's diasporic experience as the quintessence of cosmopolitan freedom and post-national modes of belonging. To other critics versed in postcolonial theory, such as Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, transnationalism signals the emergence of a "new ethic" according to which "an increased celebration of heterogeneity and plurality" may gradually come to replace "a regressive and resistant insistence on a lost homeland" (210). However, contrary to theoretical expectations, the return of India on the stage of migrant identity construction constitutes one of the most recurrent features of the post-90s literature of the Indian-American diaspora. In that sense, this literature can be seen to problematize what "transnationalism" and "diaspora" stand for by showing that the steady discarding of grand narratives such as the American Dream, the immigrant success story and the melting-pot ideal by no means coincides with what could be called a post-national refiguring of the homeland. In popular texts such as *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee or *The Vine of Desire* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni for instance, the re-metaphorization of diasporic subjectivity against multiple and simultaneous time zones undermines the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism by exposing the fault-lines of an assimilationist approach to cultural identity. Interestingly, it also reveals the blind spots and constructed nature of an ideal transnationalism, thus forcing us to step out of an increasingly institutionalized post-colonial discourse and to

revise the narrow set of prefabricated paradigms by which the Indian diaspora in the U.S. is generally investigated.

At the start of the 21st century, it seems indeed that “India” is being re-positioned at the crossroads of conflicting representations within the contemporary diasporic subjectivity, straddling both categories of the old and the new. Unsurprisingly in this context, the “un-transnational” ideology of the return is depicted as still running deep in the first and second generation migrant imaginary. This transgenerational trend is aptly captured by Vijay Mishra, who argues that one’s “homeland” is always already conceptualized “as very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible” (2). Even more compellingly in this respect, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the notion of homeland and the trope of the return are not unavoidably and exclusively tied up with a nostalgic, backward-looking stance but can also be associated, albeit in a circuitous way, with the advent of new becomings for a second generation that, in the author’s own words, must come to terms with an “intense pressure to be two things: loyal to the old world and fluent in the new” (“Change and Loss” 3).

The ambiguous moral rehabilitation of Mishra’s idea of “homeland as redemptive space” along with Lahiri’s opening up of the notion of return to a seemingly paradoxical promise of futurity constitute joint sources of inspiration for this study. In Lahiri’s second collection of short stories and more particularly, in the concluding section of the book that comprises three linked but distinct texts grouped under the heading of “Hema and Kaushik,” the finding of one’s place in the world is indeed depicted as being achieved at least as much through cultural transmogrification, hypermobility and cosmopolitan freedom as by addressing the memory traces of the past and the compulsion to return, either in a physical or in a psychological way. Mishra’s attempt to explore the idea of “writing diaspora,” in analogy with writing trauma or writing mourning, is illuminating in this context, because it constitutes a theoretical framework able to bear witness to the maintenance of a diasporic imaginary structured by the loss of the Motherland, whether this loss involves firsthand experience of migration or originates from a “phantom loss” imagined and refigured by the second generation.

Drawing on Mishra’s theorizing of the diasporic imaginary and on a close reading of the short story opening *Unaccustomed Earth*’s trilogy, “Once in a Lifetime,” this essay explores Lahiri’s representation of the second generation as consisting of disconnected, directionless, precarious individuals who, though burdened by broken filiations and transgenerational memories of loss, remain insistently attached to a lost and yet “un-dead” world, long after their parents

have themselves managed to disengage from it. Throughout “Once in a Lifetime,” Hema’s and Kaushik’s destinies interconnect, diverge and meet again, as if the two characters’ life courses were drawn to one another by the necessity of returning to a world of shared origins and re-engage with the past in order to lose themselves in a vortex of infinite regress or alternatively, to better negotiate a sense of future. By narrating Hema’s and Kaushik’s parallel journeys from childhood to adolescence, Lahiri rewrites the notion of return as melancholic attachments through which the unsymbolizable gap left by the absence of the Motherland can be represented, renegotiated and perhaps then, put to rest. Thus, I wish to show that not only does Lahiri use melancholy as a means of representing second-generation subjectivities haunted by impossible mourning and unclaimed legacies, but also that she rehabilitates the notion of return as a way of accommodating the spectral presences inherent in diasporic hereafters. Showing that melancholy and returning also bear the seeds of new becomings, “Once in a Lifetime” participates in the rethinking of a politics of (melancholic) memory in relation to diaspora.

Imagining Entangled Genealogies

As the first of the three texts that are grouped under the same heading, “Once in a Lifetime” deals with Hema’s and Kaushik’s first encounters as children and then as teenagers while introducing, both in a structural and in a thematic way, the motifs of return, loss and death that will recur throughout the short-story cycle. Although it constitutes a structural link uniting all of the three narratives under study, the use of apostrophe is particularly prominent in the first text of the trilogy. The dismantling of identity and the dislocation of time are inherent in this apostrophic form, in which a “narrating-I” keeps addressing a voiceless yet all-pervading “you” from an indeterminate time and space. In “Once in a Lifetime,” this narrative mode further reinforces a sense of doubleness and confusion in relation to time and identity. Indeed, not only is Hema as narrator split into a “narrated I” and a “narrating I,” but Kaushik as addressee and character is also divided into a “narrated you” that is firmly rooted in the past time of the story and a phantasmal, intangible “addressed you” that only exists as a projection of the narrator’s voice and thus extends its ethereal existence beyond the margins of diegetic time. In fact, the first lines of the text suggest that the implications of Kaushik’s presence in Hema’s life somehow exceed the confines of her own conscience since, from the outset, his presence already expands beyond the traces he left within her memory: “I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell party that my family threw for yours, at

our house in Inman Square, is when I began to recall your presence in my life” (Lahiri 223).

Here, ironically enough, the first inscription of Kaushik’s *presence* within the narrator’s memory almost coincides with his physical *absence*, since the move of Kaushik’s family “all the way back to India” also marks the commencement of Hema’s recollection of him. More generally, Lahiri’s text makes it clear that Kaushik’s and Hema’s relationship is characterized from the very beginning by a blurring of the boundaries between absence and presence, return and arrival, but also between Self and Other. Hema’s recollection of the farewell party during which she first registered Kaushik’s existence is indeed associated with the memory of an unbecoming traditional outfit that she has to wear for the occasion, an outsize kurta that was sent by her grandmother from Calcutta and whose waist is eloquently “wide enough to gird two of [her] side by side” (223). What the narrative suggests here is that Hema’s first conscious memory of Kaushik is coupled with, and thus somehow related to, the imagining of a phantom alter-ego whose addition to her own self would be necessary to literally fill in an identity gap both opened and outlined by a costume that embodies the Indian world of origins. The long-lasting influence and ambiguous positioning of Kaushik’s absent presence at the frontier of Hema’s self is represented by the winter clothes that she indirectly takes over from him and that she has to make her own, years after Kaushik’s departure for India. Forced indeed by her mother to “incorporate” Kaushik’s clothes in her wardrobe as she “grows into them” (226), Hema is symbolically made to inhabit the very old skin that Kaushik shed after he left the New World; or rather, she is compelled to project herself into the same layers of self that once shaped Kaushik’s own identity. Hema’s inability to literally tailor her identity to her own measurements arouses in her a feeling of profound revulsion for Kaushik’s clothes, which come to be positioned at the centre of an anxiety of identity:

I found these clothes ugly and tried to avoid them, but my mother refused to replace them. And so I was forced to wear your sweaters, your rubber boots on rainy days. One winter I had to wear your coat, which I hated so much that it caused me to hate you as a result. [...] I never got used to having to hook the zipper on the right side, to looking so different from the other girls in my class with their puffy pink and purple jackets. [...] I wanted desperately to get rid of [the coat]. I wanted it to be lost. (226)

In this excerpt, Hema displaces onto Kaushik her rage at being forced to wear a coat that marks her as different and that does not suit the gendered

codes of her American peers, as if Kaushik was crystallizing the impossibility for Hema to escape the grip of both a parental and a communal way of life and to fully identify with an American mainstream. Therefore, not only do clothes embody the porous boundary between exterior and interior, between Self and Other, but they also signify the ill-fitting and unaccommodating nature of the diasporic legacy for Hema as a child. In this context, the label that Hema's mother irons inside Kaushik's coat with her daughter's name on it not so much cancels out the garment's alien genealogy as it throws into sharper relief the interlocking of its familiar and unfamiliar origin. Faced up to the "Unheimliche" nature of her heritage by the forced appropriation of Kaushik's coat and the apposition of a name tag that nevertheless marks it as her own, Hema experiences a crisis of the proper that culminates in her attempt to abandon the coat in the school bus. Rather perversely, however, it is the name tag that eventually brings Kaushik's coat back to her, suggesting that it is her name that binds her to an inescapable yet unfamiliar legacy, fastening her to an identity that is literally knit in the very fabric of Kaushik's old self.

The impossibility to fully disentangle Kaushik's and Hema's genealogies from one another constitutes a recurrent feature of "Once in a Lifetime," as when Hema retraces her early childhood and seems to remember a time when Kaushik's mother became inseparable friends with her own, to the point where the two women ended up pooling resources and sharing every single chore in their respective households:

They shopped together for groceries and complained about their husbands and cooked together at either our stove or yours, dividing up the dishes for our respective families when they were done. They knitted together, switching projects when one of them got bored. When I was born, your parents were the only friends to visit the hospital. I was fed in your old high chair, pushed along the streets in your old pram. (225)

While this quotation makes it clear that the intertwining of Hema's and Kaushik's life-courses goes back a very long way, it also emphasizes the pivotal role the two mothers played in creating a tightly-knit community that would unite both of their families. Besides, by revealing that Kaushik's parents, the Choudhuris, are the only ones to visit the hospital on the occasion of Hema's birth, the above passage presents the sisterhood initiated by the two women as a form of substitute for far-off filiations, thus suggesting the large extent to which lack and absence underpin the compensatory kinship both mothers seek to recreate. Interestingly, although the narrative indicates that it is the visual recognition of Hema's mother's Bengalingness that first draws Kaushik's mother to her, it later on implies that, much more than their shared

origins, it is their presence in the U.S. and their joint experience of loneliness that both triggers and enables their friendship:

In Calcutta they would probably have had little occasion to meet. Your mother went to a convent school and was the daughter of one of Calcutta's most prominent lawyers [...]. My mother's father was a clerk in the General Post Office, and she had neither eaten at a table nor sat on a commode before coming to America. Those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge, where they were both equally alone. (225)

By indicating that "India" only constitutes a trigger of sorts while "America" somehow represents the "great leveller" and the "great enabler" in the two mothers' relationship, Lahiri introduces an alien presence at the centre of the fiction of common Bengaliness that bonds the two mothers together and repositions the fracture provoked by their relocation in the U.S. as invisible core of their sense of kinship. In this context, the script of cultural sameness that serves to unify and rationalize away the family-like structure surrounding the two women can be seen as a means to displace and obscure a sense of loss and isolation which paradoxically constitutes an underlying yet powerful identificatory drive, and consequently, a mainspring of affiliation. Through the genealogy of their mothers' sister-like friendship, Lahiri therefore intimates that Hema's and Kaushik's connection as much originates in the reconstituted sense of kinship that bonded them together when they were children as it derives from an urge, passed down through the generations, to cling to a fantasized narrative of common origins. The latter serves to cover up their inheritance of loss¹ even as it invisibly feeds on it, thus positioning their relationship as an allegorical – yet spurious – means to bridge, across the generations, the fissures initiated by their mothers' migration to the New World. It is therefore no wonder that Kaushik embodies for Hema a "fantasy of origin" which finds itself embedded in the narrative retracing the encounter of their mothers. Of key interest in this respect is the way in which the text bears witness to the precise moment when Kaushik's and Hema's mothers met for the first time, a period when Hema was yet to come out of her mother's womb:

Our mothers met when mine was pregnant. She didn't know it yet; she was feeling dizzy and sat down on a bench in a small park. Your mother was perched on a swing, gently swaying back and forth as you soared above her, when she noticed a young Bengali woman in a sari, wearing vermillion in her hair. [...] She told you to get off the swing, and then she and you

¹ I have borrowed this phrase from the title of one of Kiran Desai's books, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

escorted my mother back home. It was during that walk that your mother suggested that perhaps mine was expecting. (224–225)

What is most striking here is that the narrator paradoxically gains access to a “time of origins” prior to her own birth, as if the first-person narration exploded its own structural boundaries in terms of focalization and could now expand its scope to times and recollections beyond the narrator’s conscious reach. In this excerpt, the subtle, nearly imperceptible switch to first-person omniscience reflects in a structural way the high permeability of Hema’s consciousness to trans-generational “memories” and perceptions that cannot, strictly speaking, be her own. Through this narrative shift, Lahiri suggests a causal link between Hema’s effort to trace the genealogy of her connection with Kaushik back to its very beginning and the progressive dissolving of her identity in the memory traces of her own mother. In other words, the narrative implies here that there is no returning to the originating moment of the bond between the two protagonists without a collapse of identities between the generations and a dismantling of the polarities between inner and outer, between fantasy and reality, as well as between the past and the present.

The thematic aspect of this excerpt both echoes and complements its structural implications since, in many ways, Hema’s recollections from beyond the womb, so to speak, can be seen to accommodate whilst also displacing the primal fantasy of being there “at the very beginning.” As Karl Figlio points out in his essay “Getting to the Beginning,” although the most classic originating scenario centres on the primal scene of parental intercourse, primitive moments of origination can take on a variety of forms. What underpins the different versions of this classic narrative, however, is the omnipotent totalizing fantasy of witnessing, or even taking part in, one’s own conception (Figlio 154). Hema’s transgenerational “memories” take on renewed meaning in the light of Figlio’s remarks, mostly because they can be seen to conflate two originating moments into one. The originating moment of encounter between Kaushik’s mother and her own – and thus, by extension, the beginning of Kaushik’s and Hema’s relationship – is indeed juxtaposed with the news of Hema’s coming into the world, as if the narrator was refiguring the past in order to rebirth herself under the auspices of the two mothers’ budding sisterhood. Moreover, by recasting Kaushik’s mother as “instructress in pregnancy” and “breaker of the good news,” Hema indirectly refashions Kaushik as witness to her symbolic coming into the world, and consequently she fuses their selves together by inserting *him* inside the primitive moment of *her* own origination. In this respect, not only can Hema’s “fantasy of origins” be seen to position Kaushik as a recovery agent of sorts, indeed as a means to reengage with her ancestry,

but it also captures the way in which the narrator unconsciously transforms and reproduces across the generations an imaginary narrative of common origins that once bonded Kaushik's mother and her own together.

Reaching out beyond Transnationalism and Diaspora

Although the return of Kaushik's family back to the U.S. after a seven-year absence opens a new phase in the relationship between the two families, Hema's perception of Kaushik remains underpinned by the same desire to restore an illusionary sense of essential wholeness, thus providing the narrative with a sense of continuity, even of repetition, across time. In fact, much as clothing metaphors suggest that Kaushik crystallizes an anxiety of identity for the protagonist as a child, it is the reallocation of space between the two adolescents during the Choudhuris' residence at Hema's place that now reveals how deeply her relationship to Kaushik affects her sense of self. More precisely, Hema's forced relinquishing of her room to Kaushik for an unspecified amount of time triggers in her the feeling of literally not being at home in her own house and thus reopens the crisis of the proper that she experienced when having to appropriate her guest's winter coat. While the giving up of her room positions Kaushik as an irritating alien presence that Hema needs to accommodate in more ways than just one, on the other hand it also associates him with the menace of being thrust back in infancy. On her guest's arrival, Hema is indeed meant to abandon the self-imposed "American" challenge of sleeping alone in a room of her own and revert to the Indian practice, which has been encouraged by her mother all along, to sleep on a cot in her parents' room. In this respect, not only does Kaushik come to represent the impossibility for Hema to let go of the unassimilable Indian part of her identity in spite of her American birth, but, in a much similar way to what happens in her "fantasy of origins," her guest also embodies a threat of regression, a menace that her second-generation Indian-American identity may be dissolved in her parents' more monolithic version of Indianness. Significantly in this context, Hema compares the process of having to empty her room and pack up her things before Kaushik's arrival with the preparations she would make before departing to her parents' country of origins:

It was like deciding which of my possessions I wanted to take on a long trip to India, only this time I was going nowhere. Still, I put my things into a suitcase covered with peeling tags and stickers that had travelled various times back and forth across the world and dragged it into my parents' room. (230)

Here, although her journey to her parents' room proves almost motionless in terms of physical distance, Hema's decision to use a suitcase that had travelled many times between India and the U.S. somehow indicates that her microscopic trip within the confines of her own house may nonetheless result in opening new vistas on her parents' country of origin. For one thing, Hema's move to her parents' private space provides her with a unique perspective on the fault-lines characterizing the relationship between transnational and diasporic Indians and more particularly, on the socio-cultural "Indian gap" that comes to separate the two families, by allowing her to overhear disapproving comments her mother only makes at night on the extent to which Bombay changed Kaushik's parents and made the Choudhuris, uncannily enough, "more American" than the U.S. ever did (235). Clearly, Lahiri's text shows that the arrival of Kaushik's family straight from Bombay introduces Hema to another model of Indianness which, unlike her parents and the diasporic community surrounding them, overtly revels in so-called "western" treats such as stylish clothes, first-class transcontinental plane tickets and whisky-drinking. As the protagonist soon realizes, this upper-class, contemporary version of "Bombayite Indianness" increasingly unsettles her parents' own middle-class standards. On a more subterranean level, it also disrupts their archetypal diasporic representation of India as a place of origins frozen in time and immune to corrupting western influences. The exchanges Hema overhears in the privacy of her parents' bedroom can be seen to throw into even sharper relief what the resurfacing of Kaushik's parents has inadvertently started to reveal, that is, the excessively traditional, "more-Indian-than-Indian" character of the U.S.-based form of Indianness the protagonist was born and raised into. Far from inhibiting the "immediate schoolgirl attraction" (234) Hema feels for Kaushik on the day of his arrival, her mother's complaints about her guests seem to intensify it instead. Yet, this is not to suggest that Hema's infatuation is exclusively fuelled by a typically adolescent urge to oppose and challenge parental authority. In fact, while Lahiri implies that, through her crush, the protagonist somehow subverts the type of Indianness she was reared to observe, on the other hand the narrative emphasizes the suggestion that Kaushik is paradoxically perceived by Hema as more relating to her parents than to herself.

Hema's infatuation with someone who, she feels, "belong[s] to the world of [her] parents" (234), and who nevertheless embodies a "Bombayite Indianness" that shatters the very foundations of her parents'

cultural identity, is not as contradictory as it may seem. Lahiri indeed intimates that Hema's "teenage crush" on Kaushik represents less a way to challenge her parents' ossified form of Indianness than an imaginary means to reach out beyond it, that is, a way to overstep her parents by retrieving and carrying out an ahistorical mythology of single-root Indian identity that would iron out difference and reconcile the two families. Rather symbolically in this context, Hema fantasizes that she can infiltrate the partition of her parents' bedroom and reach out through it to Kaushik, who sleeps in her own room, "just on the other side of the wall" (235). Not only does Hema's daydreaming about Kaushik express a longing for immaterial forms of being that would render walls and separations between them powerless, it also centres on fantasies of full incorporation and speechless recognition, as if once their identities had been connected with one another, they could effortlessly merge and dissolve in a core of sameness: "After dreading it all this time, now I was secretly thrilled that you would be sleeping [in my room]. You would absorb my presence, I thought. Without me having to do a thing, you would come to know me and like me" (234).

Here, Hema's daydreaming is clearly reminiscent of the script of instant recognition and "unity-in-sameness" that once helped to unify and rationalize away the community-like structure binding the two families together across major class differences. In this respect, it is rather ironic that the protagonist's fantasy of "unity in absorption" is counterpoised with her mother's ever-inflating complaints about having "unwittingly opened [her] home to strangers" (245), as if Hema's romantic fantasies represented a means to redeem the growing resentment and sense of estrangement her mother experiences in relation to the Choudhuris, especially as regards her old friend. In fact, Lahiri suggests that Hema's infatuation partakes in a self-appointed mission of redressing the "Indian gap" between the two families and, more generally, of building a phantasmal bridge of continuity between two conflicting versions of Indianness: on the one hand, a strongly traditional diasporic Indianness in keeping with what Monisha Das Gupta would call the first-generation invention of the "authentic Indian immigrant family" (574), and on the other a westernized "Bombayite Indianness" that bears witness to the early stages of "Shining India," as Pankaj Mishra mockingly labels the New India in a recent article². Unsurprisingly in this context, the "unrequited crush" Hema nurtures on Kaushik proves somehow

² Pankaj Mishra appropriates this metaphor from the 2004 central government political campaign in India. See his article, "The Myth of the New India."

transmutable into a growing fondness for his parents. Indeed, it is partially alleviated by the affection the Choudhuris lavish on her, as when the narrative indicates that the attention Hema gets from the mother “almost makes up” for what she does not get from the son (246). In what follows, the interlocked substitutive and supplementary character of the protagonist’s feelings for her guest will be emphasized, so that it will become even clearer that Kaushik represents for Hema a surrogate for what is thought to be missing at the origin, or rather, a liminal entity which, while embodying a central void, simultaneously verges on the border between absence and presence because it also potentially carries within itself the means of replenishing it.

Performing the Phantom Loss of the Motherland

In many ways, the arrival of the snow Kaushik has been craving for ever since his return to the U.S. both signals a loosening-up of the invisible line that is drawn in the house between Hema’s parents and her guests and a sense of release in the “forced intimacy” that pervades all interactions between the two families. By triggering happy recollections of the last winter the Choudhuris spent in Cambridge, snow revives fond memories of the farewell party that was thrown by their hosts on the eve of their departure for India, and these nostalgic reminiscences result in uniting Kaushik’s and Hema’s parents in a common sense of sadness about the passing of time and the gilded era of their friendship. As if to signify the resurfacing of a sense of community between the two families, Hema’s father indulges in a “small taste of whisky” while Kaushik’s mother suddenly regains an interest in cooking, which she had lost, significantly enough, when the “Cambridge days” were over. Even if they constitute a mutual, belated acknowledgment of two different ways of living, or rather of two different interpretations of Indianness, these symbolic incursions on the others’ territory more seal the separateness of the two families than they gesture towards their final reconciliation. Nostalgia is in fact a great leveller, albeit a fairly artificial one. Like snow which gives a semblance of unity by covering up the landscape and enrobing it with an all-white surface, nostalgia indeed unites the Choudhouris with their hosts only because it conceals traces of dissent beneath the veneer of idealized memories.

Very symbolically in this context, the outing that Hema and Kaushik undertake in woods deemed “off-limits” by Hema’s parents culminates in the uncovering of tombstones coated with snow, as if both characters were literally digging up what remained of their joint inheritance underneath the varnish of the nostalgic togetherness their parents temporarily managed to recreate.

Cemeteries as places of second-generation epiphanies and encounters with destiny constitute a recurrent motif in Lahiri's work, as exemplified in the author's previous book. Notably, it is while exploring an East Coast cemetery during a field trip that Gogol, the U.S. born "desi" protagonist of *The Namesake*, realizes that most of the Founding Fathers' tombstones bear first names as "odd" and "unthinkable" as his own. Although Gogol keeps on perceiving, throughout the novel, his incongruous name as an embarrassing testimony to his estrangement from culturally-exclusive scenarios of total and direct filiations, his fleeting positive identification with the Founding Fathers and their "flamboyant" names nevertheless inscribes him in a collateral myth of origin that prefigures a strong, yet circuitous, affiliation, with "these very ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America" (Lahiri *The Namesake* 71).

In "Once in a Lifetime," cemeteries also come to signify the way in which partial filiations can be transformed through time and generations into solid rerouted hybridized affiliations. However, Lahiri's short story refrains from presenting hybrid destinies as a given that might, in due course, automatically and benignly befall all second-generation members of the Indian-American migrant community. Kaushik's and Hema's joint endeavour of "unburying the buried" (249) ends up emphasizing the extent to which the moorings of their interconnected genealogies anchor them, in fact, to quite divergent destinies and personal histories. In a similar way to what happens in *The Namesake* as Gogol explores some of the Founding Fathers' sepulchres, Hema's and Kaushik's uncovering of the last of the tombstones belonging to the Simonds, a family of six, initially results in the resurfacing of a name, Emma, whose uncanny resemblance with that of the protagonist suggests that, in spite of her Indian origin, she is, like Gogol, inscribed in a collateral lineage that takes its roots in the American earth. The specific narrative twist of "Once in a Lifetime," however, lies in Kaushik's revelations, which further problematize the interlocking of Hema's unearthing of her hybrid destiny with the imagining of her death via the concrete evidence of a tombstone bearing a (translated) version of her name. It is indeed significant that Hema's sense of disturbance at the similarity of Emma Simonds' name and her own *only* turns to shock and devastation as Kaushik unveils the hidden agenda behind his family's circular migration to the U.S., by referring to his mother's breast cancer and her desire to flee not only the "suffocating attention" her family in India had started lavishing on her but also the reflection of her impending decline through the eyes of her own parents.

Hema's reaction indicates that Kaushik forces her to confront a diasporic truth that is far more unthinkable, therefore far more traumatic, than the

imagining of her own “rooted” death in American soil. Through these confidences that he asks Hema not to divulge, Kaushik indeed signifies his difference with the protagonist in terms of personal history, which obliges her in turn to let go of the transgenerational fantasy of cultural unity she had projected onto him and thus to face up to her own singular hybrid destiny without the protective shield of any totalizing myth of origin. Even more compellingly, by disclosing the causal link between the onset of his mother’s disease and his family’s flight from India, Kaushik evokes the unsettling possibility that India, the Motherland, should constitute a place of origins only, where no beginnings and endings can ever converge, whence no embodiment of finitude, therefore no meaning, can ever arise. Kaushik’s mother’s refusal to be buried in American soil or cremated in India makes it clear, moreover, that she can conceive of no final destination at either end, no solid form to both encapsulate and signify her death. Her desire that her diasporic body should be reunified not with the Earth, but with the Sea, a domain evocative of immortality and the unlimited, adds up a further disturbing edge to the family secret surrounding her disease, since it serves to signal a suspension of symbolic language as regards the agony of embodiment, that is, decay and Death, but also, at the other end of the spectrum, ontological consistency and Meaning. In this respect, Kaushik’s wish that, instead of having to “scatter [his mother’s] ashes into the Atlantic,” as she instructed, she should be buried “somewhere” (249), hints at his sense of burden that he has to forge a coherent sense of self in a world in which no concrete sanctuary can ever trigger the memory of his originator and thus bring her back to him into (symbolic) existence.

Undoubtedly, Kaushik’s anticipated inability to accept that his mother’s remains should dissolve into the water destines him to a history of endless drifting in the face of death and portends a sense of disorientation and disconnectedness no country or affiliation might be able to alleviate. Kaushik’s ordeal resonates with particular poignancy in a migrant context, because his inability to objectify the loss of his mother both duplicates and encapsulates what Vijay Mishra sees as the open wound at work in the diasporic imaginary, that is, the absence of the Motherland – an absence engendering so incommensurable a sense of loss that it often remains unrepresentable and transforms the mourning for the land of origins into endless melancholia.³ Mishra’s attempt to investigate the notion of writing diaspora in analogy with writing trauma or writing mourning is illuminating in the context of “Once in a Lifetime,” mostly because it constitutes a theoretical framework susceptible to

³ See Mishra’s *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, especially its introduction and third chapter.

bearing witness to the maintenance of a specifically “diasporic” imaginary structured by the loss of the Motherland, whether this loss actually involves firsthand experience of migration or derives, more abstractly, from a “phantom loss,” that is, from the imagining and refiguring of the first-generation experience by the second-generation – what Marianne Hirsch conceptualizes as “postmemories.”⁴ Building upon Cathy Caruth’s belief that trauma can be transmitted to those who have no direct experience of its source, Mishra indeed suggests that the trauma of migration, which he compares to the “primal wound” one experiences as an infant, is somehow always already inscribed in second-generation migrant subjectivities, but as a gap emptied of meaning, an unsymbolizable absence. More generally, Slavoj Žižek likens trauma to “a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity” (qtd. in Mishra 118). Mishra’s examining of the numerous ways in which diasporic and traumatic subjectivities intersect makes it clear, moreover, that processes of transference *among* generations often come to repeat, and are thus highly likely to further complicate, the transmission of an interlocked diasporic and traumatic imaginary *between* the generations. Quoting Caruth, Mishra more generally wonders whether “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own [...] history is precisely the way in which we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (116). With the caveat that the “sanctity of memory” should not be disoriented because of this paradox in any case, Mishra indeed underlines that the transmission of trauma often invalidates the very idea of rigid boundaries between inner and outer, between victim and perpetrator or – what will be of key interest for the purposes of this study – between onlooker and partaker. “The transmission of trauma to another,” Mishra continues in this sense, “is not via identification (the classical Freudian position) but by the witnessing of the fracture in language and by being haunted or possessed by what it hides” (116).

Mishra’s theorizing of the diasporic imaginary opens new vistas for interpreting Hema’s reaction in the wake of Kaushik’s revelations. For in between the lines of Kaushik’s reluctance to accept the programmed uneartheness of his mother, so to speak, Hema can only glimpse a horror far greater than the “rooted” projection of her own finitude, as if the phantom of the Motherland was indeed beckoning through Kaushik’s virtually bereaved

⁴ It is worth mentioning here that Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” originates from the need to conceptualize the kind of “memoried” imaginings of place children of Holocaust survivors engage in so as to be able to imaginarily “locate” in space and time their parents’ life *before* the Holocaust. Interestingly for the purposes of this chapter, Hirsch believes that the notion of “postmemory” is also useful to describe “the second-generation memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” (662).

“pre-memory” of his mother’s departure. Linking endless exile to disembodied death on the one hand and loss to impossible mourning on the other, Kaushik’s confidences indeed rewrite his mother as an “un-dead” presence which, like the Motherland, can be imagined as disowning finitude through her everlasting impact on her offspring. To use Mishra’s words, Hema can only be “haunted or possessed” by what Kaushik’s revelations “hide”: the unacknowledged fantasy that diasporic bodies shall be capable of perpetually haunting the living by being thought of as still existing “on the other shore” – a potentiality arousing as much dread as desire, which uncannily resurrects the haunting void left by the absence of the Motherland, able to extend its clutch through time and generations. Consequently, what is traumatically *repeated* through the interstices of Kaushik’s confidences is the “postmemory” of the Motherland, in other words, the unsymbolizable void at the (invisible) heart of Hema and Kaushik’s second-generation destiny. That Kaushik’s and Hema’s joint encounters with destiny should be sealed in a cemetery located within ill-fated woods where, the narrator mentions twice, a boy was lost, never to be found again, casts an even more tragic light on the characters’ experience by signifying that diasporic legacies, like black holes, are powerful enough to swallow up their heirs.

What thus comes to unite the two characters towards the end of “Once in a Lifetime” is less a myth of common descent and single-root Indianness than the resurrection of the “phantom loss” of the Motherland and a shared secret that propels Hema into adulthood by endowing her with a knowledge her own parents are denied. Perhaps because they exacerbate the threat of being perpetually caught in the frozen temporality of an undying diasporic hereafter, postmemories of loss, however, prove no fertile ground for the emergence of a sense of generational empathy between Hema and Kaushik. The narrative indeed emphasizes Kaushik’s aloofness as he waits for Hema to finish crying and recover from the blow his confidences inflicted upon her, significantly “looking down at the tombstone of Emma Simonds” (250) in the meanwhile, as if he were taking the measure of his own tragic isolation by contemplating the marker of Hema’s rerouted “American” fate. Likewise, Hema and Kaushik’s final parting and the physical distance maintained between them as she follows him back home seem to indicate that the symbolic unearthing of the Simonds’ graveyard precipitates a form of mental separation between the two characters which is somehow complicated by an underlying sense of resentment:

I followed you along the path you had discovered, and then we parted, neither of us a comfort to the other, you shovelling the driveway, I going inside for a hot shower [...]. Perhaps you believed that I was crying for you, or for your mother, but I

was not. I was too young that day, to feel sorrow or sympathy. I felt only the enormous fear of having a dying woman in our house. I remembered standing beside your mother, both of us topless in the fitting room where I tried on my first bra, disturbed that I had been in such close proximity to her disease. I was furious that you had told me, and that you had not told me, feeling at once burdened and betrayed, hating you all over again. (250–251)

This excerpt makes it clear that Kaushik's mother's disease triggers so powerful an anxiety of death in Hema that she proves incapable of reaching out and commiserating over her guest's predicament, as if she were indeed transfixed by the "enormous fear of having a dying woman in [her] house." The memory of standing half-naked beside Kaushik's mother in a fitting room and being offered her first bras reaches paroxysmal intensity as she now realizes that the woman she has been looking up to ever since as a role-model of refined yet liberal Indian womanhood was in fact undermined by breast cancer all along. The present given by this precursor in female hybridized cultural identity takes on a rather ominous meaning in this context. First presented as a means to initiate the young girl to her budding womanhood and as a token of affection symbolizing the passing down of a version of westernized Indianness the U.S.-born protagonist can easily emulate, perversely enough the bras that Hema receives as a gift come to be tainted in retrospect by the shadow of disease and death. In other words, Lahiri suggests that the symbolic legacy Kaushik's mother bequeaths to Hema not so much promises the future as blocks the way to new becomings.

Perhaps because they result in curdling a positive identification into an impossible one, Kaushik's revelations arouse profound anger in Hema, as if she held him responsible for the demise of a model she is keen to embrace. In this respect, the resurgence of Hema's feelings of rage and resentment towards Kaushik signals her desire to distance herself from him, as their final parting towards the end of the story intimates, whilst also indicating a compulsive urge to create a form of melancholic ties which, through hatred, enables Hema to take revenge on, and thus indirectly to preserve, the absence of an ideal she proves incapable of relinquishing completely. Again, the narrative emphasizes the substitutive and supplementary nature of Hema's feelings for Kaushik who, for Hema, keeps representing a placeholder for what is missing in the present, whether the narrative identifies this lack as a narrative of common origin, as the phantom gap left by the "un-dead" absence of the Motherland or, eventually, as an ideal hybridity that could sustain the forging of a coherent Indian-American sense of self.

Therefore, although the uncovering of the Simond's graveyard first prefigures the differences between Kaushik's and Hema's fates, it also positions loss and the burden of facing up to it as major components uniting the two characters' destinies, suggesting moreover that melancholy and impossible mourning can in fact cement their attachment across time and beyond physical presence. In many ways, "Once in a Lifetime" emphasizes Hema's and Kaushik's common isolation towards the close of the narrative, as Hema comes to understand that neither the diasporic Indianness her parents embody nor the more glamorous form of hybrid identity Kaushik's mother incarnates can provide her with adequate role-models and help her envision a sense of future. Clearly, the ending of "Once in a Lifetime" shows that Hema's ambivalence towards Kaushik ties her up more closely not only with his own fate of impossible mourning but also with the diasporic imaginary and its melancholy inflections, as theorized by Mishra. This is not to say that Lahiri's text solely reduces Kaushik to a transitionary figure and ends up simplifying a relationship that, to the protagonist, proves in fact as alienating as it is enabling. In this respect, the renewed sense of loyalty Hema experiences in relation to her guest's secret long after his family moves out exacerbates all the ambiguity of their relationship, since the protagonist's indefectible allegiance can be seen as an implicit tribute to the generational isolation she shares with Kaushik or, conversely, as a compulsion to endorse Kaushik's melancholic assumption that his mother's desire to leave no traces on Earth testifies to the unrepresentable character of her finitude. Either way, the last lines of "Once in a Lifetime" reveal that Hema's attachment to Kaushik enables her to gain a significant measure of independence from her parents. Keeping the secret about Kaushik's mother's disease even as her parents feel they are "being snubbed" now that the Choudhuris have a house of their own, Hema divorces herself from her parents' brand of class-obsessed and narrow-minded Indianness by reasserting the memory of Kaushik's symbolic passage through her room: "I was back in my room by then, on the other side of the wall, in the bed where you had slept, *no longer hearing them*" (251; my emphasis).

This "no longer hearing them" initiated by Kaushik's passage in Hema's life crystallizes a rupture between "you" and "them" and marks the passing of a "narrated I" whose ear is still tuned to the voice of her parents, whose identity is still undifferentiated from that of the first generation. Therefore, the end of "Once in a Lifetime" can be seen as hinging on a self-reflexive point of emergence able to look back, if such a thing can be imagined, on the coming-into-being of the narrator's voice – a voice that can only materialize, or so it seems, at the end of the "circuit of communication" (Culler 59) with a textual Other engendered by the apostrophic form. Finally, Hema-as-narrator seems to

acquire her own voice not only by turning away from that of her parents but through a “detour via the Other” (Castro 118) or rather, through the inscription of the Other’s absence in the repository of the text. To put it differently, the hybridization of the traces of the Other’s absence that are structurally embedded in Lahiri’s text and the “piece of otherness” that Jonathan Culler sees to be inherent in apostrophe give voice, give life. In this sense, although Hema and Kaushik remain insistently attached to a lost and yet “un-dead” world through the melancholic bond they end up sharing, the last line of “Once in a Lifetime” performs a (hybrid) promise: the promise of alchemizing the encounter with Otherness into the possibility of mourning.

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